Alma in the Cloud: Implementation Through the Eyes of Acquisitions

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Introduction

For the past few years, cloud computing has taken wing, and many organizations, including libraries, are embracing this technology. It is transforming the shape of technology and allowing libraries to reduce spending on technology infrastructure and improve accessibility to information and resources. For many organizations, it can increase productivity with fewer staff and streamline processes. Libraries are choosing to migrate from their aging legacy library system and library-housed servers to a system that is maintained by a vendor in the cloud.

One of the cloud services that has developed over the past few years is the Ex Libris unified library management system, Alma. Alma's infrastructure promises that it will allow libraries to consolidate their disparate systems used for managing electronic, print, and digital resources, resulting in increased efficiency through data sharing and collaboration.

After thorough investigation, the Virginia Commonweath University (VCU) Libraries determined the benefits of implementing the system through the Early Adopter Program.

As Early Adopters, many challenges were encountered by the Alma Implementation Task Force (ITF). The ITF had to make configuration decisions, attend and conduct training sessions, analyze existing workflows, improve workflow efficiency, and review migrated data.

This article will provide an overview of the VCU Libraries' journey from implementation up until "Go Live" through the eyes of the Acquisitions Department. It will identify the work involved in preparing for and implementing this cloud-based library system. There will be a discussion of the advantages and challenges. Readers will learn about implementation processes, cleanup and workflow issues, and how Ex Libris responded to problems. Finally, this article will share lessons learned by the ITF.

A Little VCU History

Virginia Commonwealth University is located in Richmond, Virginia, and is one of the largest research institutions in Virginia, enrolling over 32,000 students.

The VCU Libraries is a research facility that supports the University's teaching, research, service, and patient care mission with an annual budget of over $17.5 million, 2.5 million volumes, 61,000 serials, and 600,000 e-books and other distinguished materials. It provides support for the VCU Qatar Library. Fitting in with VCU's strategic plan for growth, architectural work has begun on a major addition to the James Branch Cabell Library that is expected to open in 2015.

The Libraries include the James Branch Cabell Library and the Tompkins-McCaw Library for the Health Sciences. It has 51 professionals and 90 support staff. VCU operates programs in Doha, Qatar, and in Northern Virginia. The VCU Libraries is a member of the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA), a statewide networking consortium. Up until the time Alma was adopted, the VCU Libraries used Aleph as its ILS and SFX as its link resolver. Primo was brought in as the discovery layer in the fall of 2011 for testing and phased in during January 2012. VCU was the third library in North America to implement Alma as its next generation cloud-based library management system.

Current Workflow Challenges

The Acquisitions Department has performed several workflow analyses over the years to identify inefficiencies. Breakdowns in communication and disconnects in e-journal workflows were identified.[1] Procedures were put in place to enhance workflows and improve communication. However, problems continued to exist.

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[1] Branch, D. (2012). Electronic workflows: Taking it to the cloud. *Serials Librarian, 63*(3–4). http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0361526x.2012.721739

Current workflow challenges were identified, and the Libraries were seeking ways to achieve greater efficiency. Some challenges identified were:

- Convoluted and inflexible workflows
- Heavy workloads
- No integration of systems
- Disparate pieces of information
- Inability to track e-resources
- Duplication of tasks and information
- Tracking license statuses
- Communication silos/sharing data
- Disconnects in processes
- Tracking renewals
- A lot of paper forms
- Maintenance of links and holdings in Aleph, OPAC, and SFX
- Hardware failures, software installs, upgrades, compatibility issues

Why Move to the Cloud?

VCU Libraries had used Aleph for the past 10 years and had been satisfied with its performance. However, Aleph was beginning to show its age, and the library believed Ex Libris would gradually diminish the level of attention for enhancements. The Libraries is continuously seeking ways to streamline operations, integrate processing of materials, and provide users with seamless information access. Cloud computing would allow the Libraries to store data securely, develop efficient workflows, and create a single point of management for all library resources.

Some other reasons for moving to the cloud included:

- Replace traditional in-house workflows
- Flexible workflows
- Integrate separate systems and disparate data
- Eliminate paper documents

- Adapt to new technology more quickly
- Automate more processes
- Share information more easily
- Incorporate discovery services
- Build a presence on the web

What Is Alma?

Ex Libris defines Alma as the next generation library management service that will consolidate, optimize, and extend the scope of library services.[2] Alma will integrate the disparate systems that many libraries use for the upkeep of their electronic, print, and digital resources. Workflows can become most efficient through the sharing of data and collaborating of services. Resources can be channeled to concentrate on services that occur inside and outside the library. Ex Libris developed Alma to enhance systems and support new services and initiatives. It is a unified resource management system which supports the whole suite of library operations, including selection, acquisition, print management, electronic management, metadata management, link resolution, digitization, fulfillment, and discovery. Alma integrates Aleph/Voyager, Verde/Meridian, DigiTool, SFX, and MARCIT and creates a single environment for managing library resources in the cloud.

Why Become an Alma Early Adopter?

In 2010, VCU Libraries was on the verge of buying two new servers to support its operations. After researching available library management systems, Alma was found to be an attractive prospect, and the library was intrigued by its workflow properties. Besides a favorable return on investment, as an Early Adopter there were additional attractive financial incentives that made the choice easier. Around the same time, the Libraries were looking at the discovery tool Primo and felt that Primo and Alma, both Ex Libris

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[2] Ex Libris. (n.d.). *Why your library should move to Ex Libris Alma: An Ex Libris Alma Solution brief.* Retrieved from http://www.exlibrisgroup.com/files/ Products/Alma/WhyYourLibraryShouldChooseAlma.pdf

products, would be a good fit. The library was mindful of the University's goal in its "Quest for Distinction" strategic plan of increasing scholarship productivity with membership in the Association for Research Libraries (ARL); therefore, becoming an Early Adopter could help develop tools to harness scholarly resources that the library collects.

Alma moves the ILS into the cloud to software as a service (SaaS), eliminating the need for the university to manage servers and a physical storage network. It streamlines library operations and integrates processing of electronic, print, and digital resources.

After stating a true interest in Alma, VCU received an invitation to upgrade its software as an "early adopter" that was being offered to only twelve North American libraries in 2011. The library faculty and administration were unanimous in endorsing the upgrade and decided to engage as an early adopter. Participating in the Early Adopter Program would give the VCU Libraries an opportunity to be fully engaged in Alma's final development before its general release in 2012.

Even though Ex Libris is continuing to support Aleph, it could not provide quality performance measures that were offered by Alma, such as redesigning workflows for greater efficiencies, data sharing, and collaborating. Alma enables the library to continue its long and productive working relationship with Ex Libris and keep its position as an institution on the cutting edge of technology.

Implementation Services

A timeframe for implementation was agreed upon between Ex Libris and VCU and was estimated to be approximately six months. A project plan was created to indicate major milestones and lay out relevant resources, activities, complete assigned tasks, and meet deadlines. Ex Libris and VCU agreed upon a "Go Live" date. Ex Libris coordinated all activities dealing with implementation that fell under their responsibility such as data migration, configuration, training, implementation support, and documentation. VCU Libraries was responsible for creating an implementation team, ensuring access to data,

attending meetings, determining and reviewing migration and configuration settings, performing testing, training staff, and delivering feedback.

Alma Implementation Task Force

The ITF was charged on October 21, 2011, with the responsibility for managing the transition to Alma. Duties included: collaborating with Ex Libris, Alma's Development Partners, and other Early Adopters to bring to production one of the first instances of Alma; manage the calendar to ensure that planned activities were completed in a timely fashion according to agreed-upon timeframes; undergo training on the Alma system from Ex Libris; organize and provide training to other library staff; organize operations-based work groups within the library to provide input into issues such as configuration, data migration and workflow changes; and keep the library informed of implementation progress and issues that require attention or affect schedules.

Twelve members were appointed with operational responsibilities for Systems, Collections, Acquisitions, Cataloging, Serials, Fulfillment, health sciences library operations, and a VCU-Qatar representative.

Implementation Journey

Once VCU Libraries agreed upon a March to August 2012 implementation schedule for Alma as proposed by Ex Libris, the work began. However, implementation was pushed back a month to take advantage of an upcoming Alma workshop at the end of March 2012 in Boston. The new start date for implementation was April 2012. The Libraries were on a very fast track to implementation because the Head of Acquisitions was retiring and it was essential to glean her knowledge of fiscal processes before her departure in April 2013. The first meeting with Ex Libris' Implementation Team transpired through a web session on April 3, 2012.

One goal of the ITF was to keep activities, progress, and issues transparent and support open communication. The ITF decided to use a blog, wiki, and Google Docs for information sharing. Staff were encouraged to use the blog and wiki to keep informed of progress.

The blog, created in January 2012, was called "Alma Matters." Its goal was to provide staff with regular communications about implementation progress. The existing staff wiki was used to record issues and provide another way for staff to keep informed. Google Docs was used by the ITF to work on documents, allowing the team to create and easily share online documents. The wiki and blog proved to be a very effective method of communication for the staff.

A kickoff meeting got the ball rolling in April 2012. The ITF met the Ex Libris Project Team through an online session and was given an overview of the implementation process. We were informed of Ex Libris's responsibilities. We learned that VCU's responsibilities included project preparation, training, workflow analysis, migration, configuration, and authentication.

Ex Libris suggested that we clean up our data in Aleph before the migration, such as standardizing codes and cleaning up bib records, POs and invoices, streamlining codes, and identifying and deleting duplication. We tried to do as much cleanup as possible before data migration.

One of the first tasks the ITF had to perform was an analysis of existing workflows. Each member had to document activities for Aleph performed in his/her department. Staff in respective departments were asked to write standard Aleph workflows and include handoffs of materials or processes to another person/department for completion. The goal was to identify current workflows and construct parallel workflows in Alma.

The ITF felt this was the perfect time to make substantive changes to library functions, ensuring efficient and streamlined workflows and enhanced services since we were reviewing workflows, processes, and policies. Clean and efficient workflows needed to be migrated to Alma. Effort was taken to identify things that could be eliminated, consolidated, or streamlined. Library staff were given an opportunity to contribute to this task.

A Google Doc was created to record suggestions, a process we called "Library Reboot." Fields in the document were labeled as follows: Proposal, Opportunities, Challenges, Impact, Approvals, Implementation, Author, Comments. Each ITF member recorded his/her proposals in the document. After proposals were gathered, there was a discussion to determine which ones were viable and could be supported by the library staff. This was a time of self-examination and recalibration. This process made the ITF and staff closely examine historical workflows and policies and consider why they were being done. It was a very painful process but paid off when we went to production.

Technical issues had to be discussed with Ex Libris, such as Alma structure, data migration, and configuration. We used a migration guide and checklist created by Ex Libris to ensure top level migration issues were identified and examined. The ITF completed a configuration questionnaire that would help identify library codes for migration, such as material types, vendor funds, and location codes.

The Libraries were given an Alma sandbox for training/testing, allowing staff outside the ITF to access this region to see what the production environment would look like.

Haziness in the Cloud

The capability for efficiency, reliability, and collaboration was definitely witnessed during the implementation of Alma. However, there were some difficulties encountered during the process. As with implementation of any new system, there are always some hiccups.

The Libraries were used to performing their own configurations for previous ILS systems. When we had to make configuration decisions that were performed by Ex Libris, there were feelings of a lack of control over data. We did not always have a good understanding of configuration questions and the impact that decisions would have in Alma. Decisions were based on the level of knowledge that we had at the time and did not always turn out the way we thought they would. One occurrence of this was when Acquisitions team members unknowingly instructed configuration data to close all order records that did not have

activity within the past year. When configuration instructions were applied, we discovered that some current order records had been closed, and we did not understand why. This problem was reported to Ex Libris and we were informed that a configuration decision had instructed the system to close order records that did not have activity for the past year. We quickly instructed Ex Libris to change that decision and were informed that the records could be reopened.

The Acquisitions Department was dismayed to discover that some of its historical data from certain note fields in Aleph would not migrate to Alma. When we first read the migration documentation, there was no clear indication as to whether these data would migrate or not. Later, we found out certain notes fields could not be migrated. These notes contained information on subscription history, claim statuses, vendor responses, and receiving data. We had to figure out a way to save these notes. After talking with Ex Libris, it was determined that the notes could be extracted from Aleph and put in a spreadsheet, which we did. The spreadsheet was enormous. Some notes were duplicated and some did not export into the spreadsheet, but at least a majority of notes were available.

Alma documentation is dynamic since it is continuously being updated. Monthly updates are posted on the Ex Libris Documentation portal. There is a Help button in Alma for browsing for online help. However, in between documentation updates, changes occurred that we were not aware of. This threw us off sometimes, but once we figured out the update, we were okay. Even though the updates surprised us at the time, they were beneficial to us.

Collaboration among ITF members was essential. There were times when it took many of us to figure out a problem. For example, confusion arose about selecting the correct department for items. What status should an item have? Should there be a distinction between VCU's organizational department and Alma's organizational department? Should they function as one big department instead of separate departments? After an online session with Ex Libris, we had a better understanding of

departmental functions and statuses within Alma. The ITF performed numerous tests to identify the best departmental functions for our workflows and resolved the problem.

Some other challenges that were encountered were:

- Realizing a need for change
- Preparing to embrace change
- Letting go of old ways
- Clear vision of change
- Finding time
- Adhering to timetables
- Training
- Researching workflows
- Satisfying users
- Addressing obstacles
- Learning new terminology

Ex Libris Response

The ITF developed a good working relationship with the Ex Libris Project Team. They led us through the process and were good at providing information that ensured a smooth migration. Communication was enhanced through a mailing list, regular calls between project teams, the eService Pivotal (currently SalesForce) problem reporting system, the Ex Libris Documentation Center, WebEx sessions, online help, videos of selected online features, a What's New link, and project status reports. Sometimes we had to push Ex Libris hard to get some changes performed, but they were very responsive to our needs and paid close attention to details to keep us on schedule.

Lessons Learned

The Implementation Task Force members shared some lessons that they learned during the implementation process. Here is what different individuals had to say:

- Test, train, and test.

- Any new system is an opportunity to question old ways of doing things.

- Developing a new system is messy.

- Focus on the details, but remember the goals.

- Ex Libris is getting just as much from the implementation team as they are giving to us.

- The work done by the VCU staff has helped propel Alma forward.

- Learning the system has proved challenging due to the refinements that are being made on an almost daily basis.

- Positive attitude and positive thinking really do help in an endeavor like this.

- Implementation process like this is possible from halfway around the world. The WebEx meetings and regular conference calls made it possible.

- Importance of clear communication and good examples, patience, politeness, and persistence when dealing with the vendor's implementation team.

- Important to document what you tested so when you come back later you will know where the problem is found.

- Do not give up. It is going to get better. It is a work in progress.

- Witnessed the collaboration between departments and realized just how dependent we really are upon each other to reach goals.

- It is hard to be critical of workflows that have been in place for years, but departments must analyze existing workflows consistently.

- It is all right to fear change. The cloud is taking us to places we have not been before. However, you need to overcome this fear.

- Keep communication open between you and the vendor. Things do not always work like they should even if the documentation says so.

- Each library will have unique needs. Identify "your" needs and make them known.

Conclusion

The VCU Libraries can proudly say that it succeeded in the Alma implementation process. We went live on October 24, 2012. The process was not always smooth, but it was an interesting journey. There were many challenges, but with testing, training, documentation, Ex Libris guidance, and most of all determination and collaboration, we overcame many challenges. We witnessed significant growth and development of Alma. Alma has proven that it can create efficiencies and remove communication silos. There were times when we had to give up on resolving an issue and had to seek help from Ex Libris. Not everything works like we want it, and some processes are more complex than they were in Aleph. However, using creativity and collaboration, the ITF developed work-around methods for handling difficult problems. The heroic efforts of the ITF in providing helpful feedback and contributions has made VCU an emerging leader among the Alma community.

Alma is a dynamic system with changes constantly occurring. With each update, new capabilities are experienced. The best is yet to come. One might ask if we would do this all again. The answer is "yes." We are always pushing our library to the next level so that user services are enhanced, University goals are supported, and VCU emerges as a leader. Of course, there is our interest in experimentation and sense of adventure.